

Sucker Suburbs

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Traditionally suburbia has been the secluded residential outposts for the cities' lower-earning workforce, dependent on the city as a hub of facilities, wealth and centralised resources. This is a precarious position as at a hint of disruption to this life-line can threaten its existence. Now with global warming and predictions in the rise of many living costs due to our aging dependence on fossil fuels for transport and energy production, these suburbs are in serious danger of becoming permanently marooned. Naturally mass-relocation of suburbia into dense urban areas is not an option, but making suburbia more self-sufficient and in turn more sustainable is.

A self-sufficient suburb utilises and creates its own resources by producing and consuming as much as it can in a closed loop cycle. This means producing food, water, energy and creating jobs within itself. Growing food locally, recycling and collecting water locally as well as using local renewable power resources are concepts that can be worked into design projects and in turn create local jobs. However, these concepts alone cannot make a suburb sustainable, the whole concept of self-sufficiency and sustainability is an attitude that needs to be worked into the community.

Making a suburb more self-sufficient starts with tackling four main issues; transport, opportunity, education and community. These issues cannot be tackled with built-form alone, but the design opportunity lies in using built form to encourage people to react to these issues in a positive way and owning a piece of their communities' direction. A complete rebuild of an area, while offering planning advantages, is seen as not advantageous as it is expensive, strips any local character and familiarity and with it community. Instead a series of strategic public interventions which promote self-sufficient behaviour, that doesn't enforce behaviours but allow residents to still make their own choices, is more constructive and community building.

Ensuring a suburb has good, reliable transport options within itself as well as to neighbouring communities and city hubs is very important, as it the arteries of a suburb. Without transport the community cannot, work, learn and grow. Sustainable transport options start with releasing the dependence on fossil fuelled transport, in particular personal cars. This can be achieved in a number of ways;

- Regular local shuttles, perhaps powered by alternative energies, that connect to important points of activity within the suburb, such as train stations, education facilities, health care, business centres and shopping areas.
- Encouraging walking and cycling as an empowered mode of transport (people are less frustrated when they have control of their own transportation) by creating safe pathways as well as bicycle hubs for storage, education, maintenance and purchase.
- Reducing travel distance between residences and basic needs, which allows and encourages them to walk or ride, by dispersing resources, densifying central locations and appropriate planning.
- Strengthen long-distance transport to other suburbs and the city, to ease employment and education opportunities, by having regular timing of appropriate occupancy and multiple modes of transport to fall back on.

Creating opportunities within a suburb is very important, not just for education and employment but also for community interaction, lifestyle choice and flexibility. Opportunities exist in creating flexible spaces thorough out the suburb, in the home, next door and down the street. These spaces create opportunity for local commerce, recreation, interaction and education. Spaces can include interventions such as;

- Large multi-use open spaces, that can become a market, festival or recreation space.
- Community gardens that provide local produce for sale and also education for growing your own vegetables at home.
- Flexible and culturally sensitive houses that can allow the re-arrangement of spaces for different lifestyles and cultures. For example a space that could be turned into a home office or workroom, a garden that can be used to grow vegetables or an outdoor kitchen.

- Flexible spaces in general that allow residents to take-over and have a sense of control and ownership over their surroundings and instil local pride and respect for facilities.
- Spaces that available for community groups and organisations, such as support groups, community car pooling, child minding and so on.

Education, and access to it, is an important part of any community. However, not just formal education like primary, secondary and tertiary, but also informal education through community groups, sports clubs and events. Education can be encouraged and provided by;

- Dispersing primary and secondary education throughout the community, to allow easy access for all families.
- Provide comprehensive tertiary education opportunities, through local TAFE and University facilities as well as good transport access to broader campuses.
- Create spaces that provide opportunities for local communities to gather, celebrate and share knowledge, this could be open spaces indoor or outdoor, office/group rooms, workshops and other hands-on facilities.

Communities can be built through encouraging interaction and instilling cultural pride. Community cannot be built, but only encouraged through a mixture of planning good transport between residences and facilities and planning spaces that create opportunities for the community to interact, learn, trade and grow. Community groups and organisations that should be encouraged to set-up and flourish in communities include;

- Community Gardens, local produce and education.
- Bicycle repair/workshops, education and cheap transport.
- Local Markets; local produce and crafts.
- Sports clubs and sporting events.
- Cultural Festivals, celebrate traditions and cultural diversity.
- Diverse faith groups and places of worship.
- Local restaurants, cafes and other social venues.
- Local businesses, basic needs and potentially local produce or crafts
- Support groups for women, immigrants etc.
- Crèches and child minding groups.
- Car pooling groups.
- Pedestrian pathways and parks for relaxation and socialisation.
- Craft/Hobby groups.

These inventions will need to be clever and highly considered to respond to the needs and cultural attitudes of the community positively, this is both the challenge and opportunity. Projects will need to be ambitious and potentially eye-catching, to capture the positive attention of all ages, as well as being utilitarian and unpretentious. Cultural sensitivity is also every important, to make the project inclusive, one strategy is to create a relatively blank canvas to allow the community to decorate, modify and make it its own. With careful consideration and community participation any sucker suburb can become a self-sufficient one.